

Recast and Metalinguistic Feedback in Teaching and Learning L2 Writing: A Comparative Study

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Corrective feedback has long been raised in education and psychology, but has attracted much attention in recent years, especially with the advent of form-focused instruction. Great many studies have been conducted to investigate the efficacy of the corrective feedback and its types in the process of language learning and teaching. The purpose of this paper is to study the efficacy of recast and metalinguistic clues as two types of feedback. By selecting these two types, the study also aimed at comparing the implicit and explicit types of feedback. To this end, 81 university students were randomly selected in two groups in an essay writing course. Two target structures were adopted: relative clause, and passive case. One group received their feedback on these structures using recast, and the other group received metalinguistic clues. The structure subtest of TOEFL was administered as pre- and posttest. The findings of the study indicated that while both proved efficient to some degrees, metalinguistic clues were more efficacious than its counterpart, recast. This study also suggested that corrective feedback, no matter what type is being put to use, could provide a highlighted input, for it raises a selective attention for the input on the side of the learners and this physical saliency can work for the betterment of language learning.

Key words: recast, metalinguistic feedback, explicit and implicit feedback, L2 writing

Corrective Feedback is one of the issues in second language learning which has grown to be a major concern both among theoreticians and practitioners. SLA researchers are concerned with whether feedback has any effect on learners' interlanguage development and the type of feedback which is suitable for this purpose. Teachers are also concerned with whether or not they should correct learners errors, and when and how to do it. Second language learning has witnessed an increase in the number of studies on corrective feedback. One reason for this can be the problem teachers have faced in classes. As a matter of fact, despite the efficacy of communicative language teaching in improving learners' fluency, they have still problem with accuracy, particularly syntactic one. Many grammatical errors, which were once simple mistakes, are committed by intermediate or even advanced L2 learners which could be resolved in earlier stages of language learning. This is usually due to the fact that the mainstream L2 teaching methods underlie the fluency and how language is used and little attention is paid to accuracy and the techniques to focus on it. Hence, if these mistakes are not touched on when it is due, they will be fossilized and turn out to be one of the major challenges of teachers in intermediate and advanced level classes. Corrective feedback can act as a remedy to make up for the lost identity of grammar and structure. Talking of the importance of feedback, Krashen and Seliger (1975, cited in Nicholas, Lightbown, & Spada, 2001, p. 720) observed that "the two characteristics common to all L2 teaching methods they had examined were *discrete point presentation* and *feedback on error*". This study's sought to investigate the functions of two types of corrective feedback, recast and metalinguistic. These two types are selected since they are the implicit and explicit feedback respectively. A comparative study on the efficacy of them is the next purpose of the present study.

CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

In more general term commonly used in information-processing models,

Dekeyser (2007, p. 307) defines it like this: “information provided after a given process regarding the success or failure of that process”. In language acquisition, according to Ellis (1994, p. 702), the term ‘feedback’ refers to “information given to learners which they can use to revise their interlanguage”. For Chaudron (1977), *corrective feedback* refers to “any reaction of the teacher which clearly transforms, disapprovingly refers to, or demands improvement of the learner utterance” (cited in Panova & Lyster, 2002, p. 574). There are some terminologies generally being employed in this area.

Evidence, most frequently used in theoretical issues, is in Leeman’s (2007, p. 112) term “information about whether certain structures are permissible in the language being acquired”. But depending on whether the error is directly corrected or not it is divided into positive evidence, in which certain information which is possible in target language is given, and negative evidence, in which information which is not possible is given. As feedback is given in response to an utterance, it can inform us of the success or failure of the process of producing that utterance. The former is called positive feedback and the latter negative feedback. It is to note that negative feedback may contain either positive or negative evidence or even both. Most research in second language acquisition has focused on negative feedback and is in favor of its application (e.g., Chandler, 2003; Gass, 2003). This is despite the fact that not all SLA researchers in the past and present were in favor of it (e.g., Krashen, 1987; Robb, Ross and Shortreed, 1986; Truscott, 1996). Some like Fozio (2001) have taken no position for or against it.

TYPES OF CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

Literature is enriched with a number of types of feedback which are more or less complementary. One of them is the listings presented by Lyster and Ranta (1997) which distinguished six different types of feedback:

1. *Explicit correction* refers to the explicit provision of the correct form.
2. *Recasts* involve the teacher's reformulation of all or part of a student's utterance, minus the error.
3. *Clarification requests* indicate to students either that their utterance has been misunderstood by the teacher or that the utterance is ill-formed in some way and that a repetition or a reformulation is required.
4. *Metalinguistic feedback* contains either comments, information, or questions related to the well-formedness of the student's utterance, without explicitly providing the correct form.
5. *Elicitation* refers to at least three techniques that teachers use to directly elicit the correct form from students. First, teachers elicit completion of their own utterance by strategically pausing to allow students to "fill in the blank". Second, teachers use questions to elicit correct forms. Third, teachers occasionally ask students to reformulate their utterance.
6. *Repetition* refers to the teacher's repetition, in isolation, of the student's erroneous utterance. In most cases, the teacher adjusts his/her intonation so as to highlight the error.

There is also a seventh one which was *multiple feedback*, which refers to combinations of more than one type of feedback in one teacher turn. In Roberts' (1995) and Lyster's (1998a) listings, there is one more and it is *cue*, when teachers cue learners to repeat their utterances. Panova and Lyster (2002) also added one more—translation.

FOCUS ON FORM AND INPUT ENHANCEMENT

In his seminal paper, Long (1991, cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 639) distinguished two terms of focus on forms, which refers to "instruction that seeks to isolate linguistic forms in order to teach and test them one at a time", and focus on form, which "involves alternating in some principled way between a focus on meaning and a focus on form" (ibid). In fact, his purpose

seemed to be revisiting the status of teaching grammar amid all the current developments in language instruction and to grant the deserving reputation which had since been rendered forgotten. In focus on form, learners' attention is to be raised for specific linguistic property while taking part in a communicative activity. This attention-raising, or noticing as put forth by Schmidt (2001), can restructure the flow of language to its better mode. Schmidt (2001, cited in Robinson, 2001, p. 23) summarized it this way: "Since many features of L2 input are likely to be infrequent, non-salient, and communicatively redundant, intentionally focused attention may be a practical (though not theoretical) necessity for successful language learning". Schmidt (1990) also underlines the role of awareness in noticing but asserts that a higher level of awareness and rule understanding, while facilitative for learning, is not strictly necessary. Schmidt (1995) further refines his definition of noticing as being "nearly isomorphic with attention,"(cited in Combs, 2004, p. 3).

Terrell (1991, cited in N. Ellis, 2008, p. 389), characterized explicit grammar instruction as "the use of instructional strategies to draw the students' attention to, or focus on, form and/or structure", with instruction targeted at increasing the salience of inflections and other commonly ignored features by firstly pointing them out and explaining their structure, and secondly by providing meaningful input that contains many instances of the same grammatical meaning-form relationship.

Regarding the role of attention Tomlin and Villa (1994, p. 3) considered three functions: *alertness*, *orientation*, and *detection*, none of which requires awareness in order to become functional. They define them like this:

Alertness [is] as an overall readiness to process incoming stimulus; orientation is a process that directs attentional resources to a particular stimulus at the exclusion of others, and detection is the registration of the stimulus. After detection has occurred, according to Tomlin and Villa, the further processing of input can occur. Unlike Schmidt, Tomlin and Villa consider awareness to be unnecessary for detection, and subsequently acquisition, to take place.

Focus on form, therefore, can appear to be purely communicative but the input is skillfully formed to contain the target form. Some other types of task embrace the target form quite explicitly like consciousness-raising tasks in grammar in which learner should generate grammar rules or solve grammatical problems using the target language form. It is sometimes argued that providing a variety of consciousness raising activities can improve learners' accuracy, which aim to draw the learner's attention to linguistic properties of the L2 by focusing on the form or grammar of the L2.

Input enhancement, or input salient enhancement, is the term Sharwood Smith (1991) has proposed to replace consciousness raising (cited in White, Spada, Lightbown, & Ranta, 1991, p. 417). The reason why he renamed it was the point that one can only know that some aspects of the input have been highlighted in one way or another, so affiliation of this to raising consciousness is not fair. Fotos (1993, 1994) maintains that through input reinforcement, structures have been made physically salient through highlighting, underlining, or other treatments. As one of the four kinds of input and besides other three types of input called comprehensible, simplified, and modified inputs, van Patten (2000) clarifies that enhanced input "examines ways to manipulate the input in order to accelerate the acquisition process or to minimize problems" (cited in Rast, 2008, p. 18). The basic premise of these studies is that redirecting learners' attention during input processing, when they fail to notice a particular structure in the language, may aid in the acquisition of that structure. According to Doughty (2003), it is still not clear what elements can effectively brought into attentional focus during input processing, nor for which elements there is a long-term effect.

There are two types of input enhancement. Hwang (2005, p. 31) categorizes it into "learner-generated and teacher-generated. Learner-generated is defined as learners' participation in a task that is carefully constructed to promote noting the form or structure in the L2, whereas teacher-generated means that teachers direct and control attention to form". Some studies including Leow (1998) were carried out to investigate the effects of these two types of input enhancement. Leow was keen to know

whether an amount (single vs. multiple) or a type (teacher-centered vs. learner-centered) of exposure to the same morphological information would have positive effects on the learners' development after one semester. The findings of this study suggest that the most beneficial effects were shown in both multiple and learner-centered exposure. And there were differential performances based on type of post assessment task (Hwang, 2005).

EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT FEEDBACK

In psychological research, implicit and explicit feedbacks have been at the heart of many theories and a great many studies. N. Ellis (2007, pp. 21-22) makes a distinction between these two:

Implicit learning is acquisition of knowledge about underlying structure of a complex stimulus environment by a process which takes place naturally, simply, and without conscious operation. Explicit learning is a more conscious operation where the individual attends to particular aspects of the stimulus array and volunteers and tests hypotheses in a search for structure.

Corrective feedback is varied in that some are implicit and some are explicit. Ellis, Loewen, and Erlam (2006) explain that when there is implicit feedback, there is no overt indicator that an error has been committed, whereas in explicit feedback types, there is.

THE STUDY

This rich literature over the overriding role of corrective feedback in raising learners' attention and also the variety of feedback providing method (whether implicit and explicit) could shape my scattered ideas in to forming the hypotheses. This study aims at providing liable answers to these

questions:

1. Does recast (as an implicit feedback) act effectively as input enhancers?
2. Does metalinguistic feedback (as an explicit feedback) act effectively as an input enhancer?
3. Does exposure to input with *recasts* lead to greater L2 development than exposure to input with metalinguistic feedback?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of the study were all Iranian undergraduate university students who were studying English language translation and English language literature at Islamic Azad University, Roudehen Branch. They were two essay writing classes with totally 81 students all of whom were females and in their fifth semester. They answered a brief demographic questionnaire at the beginning of the semester. The students' average age was 23.7 ranging from 22 to 25. They were generally consistent regarding their background information in learning English with up to 4 semesters (2 years) studying English. They did not attend any English class during the treatment period.

Instrument

To homogenize the students regarding their structural knowledge before the beginning of the treatment, Section 2 of ETS TOEFL Practice Test (2003) related to the structure and written expression which contained 40 items was administered as a pretest and a posttest. The reliability index of the subtest was calculated 0.81 through test-retest method.

Out of the corrective feedback types listed by Lyster and Ranta (1997) and Panova and Ryster (2002), two were selected: recast and metalinguistic

feedback. The reason for selecting these two, among others, was that the former is considered to be an implicit technique and the latter is an explicit technique so as to meet the requirements of this study.

Target Structures

Two grammatical features targeted in this study were relative clauses and passive case. In the years I have been teaching the writing courses in English institutes and universities, I have witnessed a traditional problem among Iranian students to deal with the concept of relative clauses and passive case. The reason for the former might be, unlike their mother tongue, the diversity of relative pronouns for different functions in English. For example, in Farsi there is one relative pronoun /ke/ applicable for time, person (subjective and objective), place, reason, object, and possession, while in English there are various types of relative pronouns with specific functions. Moreover, as the means of receiving feedback is written, participants are required to adopt a formal style. This necessitates the use of compound and complex sentences which have the relative clauses as the backbone.

Passive cases were also selected because of the differences between their mother tongue and the second language English. In Farsi passive cases are made by the conjugation of the verb /šodæn/ with the main verb. However, in English there are different forms of “to be” verb together with the change of verb and reversing the positions of subjects and objects, which seems to be a complex process for them.

Procedure

All 81 university students who were supposed to participate in the study were undergraduate students in two essay writing classes. The semester had sixteen sessions. In the first session the TOEFL subtest of structure and written expression was administered to all the participants, and data were gathered. The result could help to homogenize the students regarding their

knowledge of structure. Five students were present in the classes but were crossed out from research result analysis as they gained the extreme scores in pretest and totally 76 students (38 in each class) remained for the study. Along with the subtest, the demographic information of the students was collected as well. I taught one of the classes, and the second class was taught by one of my colleagues, who was briefed before the beginning of the semester to be homogeneous regarding our teaching method and content. Every session, as part of their homework, they were supposed to do a piece of writing with a common topic and send it to my e-mail. I would read the writings of both groups and provide them with the appropriate feedback technique. One group received feedback using recast and the other group received metalinguistic feedback on the target structures: relative clauses and passive case (feedback was provided for other structures as well). The students were advised to review their last week's assignments along with the provided feedback and then put pen to paper and write their new writings. This continued for ten consecutive sessions (one session every week). The week after the tenth session the TOEFL subtest of structure and written expression was administered again, and the data were collected. Then the raw scores were analyzed through SPSS software (16th Ver.). Moreover, about one month later, there was another subtest of structure and written expression. This was done to measure the students' knowledge of the target structures to see whether they have turned into uptake or they have been forgotten.

RESULTS

Collected data from both groups were analyzed. Comparing the mean score of the groups could indicate the homogeneity of them in terms of the structure knowledge. Five outliers were omitted as they could seriously distort the statistical results. The mean score of the groups were about the same and this showed that students in both groups were consistent in terms of their structure knowledge. The box plot is presented in Appendix. Table 1

displays the result after deleting the outliers:

TABLE 1
Mean Score of the Students of both Groups in the Pretest

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest	Group 1	38	10.1	2.11
	Group 2	38	10.2	1.96

Second, the data collected from the pretest and the posttest in both groups were analyzed to see whether there was any gain score in each group as a result of the specific type of feedback. This was done by comparing the mean score of the students in each group from pretest to posttest. To this end, a paired-sampled t-test was used for each group separately. Tables 2 and 3 show the result of the comparison between the pretest and the posttest in group 1 which received recast.

TABLE 2
Pretest-posttest Comparative Data for Group 1

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest	38	10.1	2.11
Posttest	38	12.45	1.91

TABLE 3
Paired Sample Test for Group 1

	Paired Differences				
	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretest-posttest	-2.34	1.85	-7.81	37	.000

메모 [M1]: The vertical line between these two boxes was reset.

The tables indicate that the difference between the pretest and the posttest in the first group is significant at 0.01. Therefore, this explains the difference between the mean scores in the pretest and the posttest in the group which received metalinguistic feedback (Group 2).

TABLE 4
Pretest-posttest Comparative Data for Group 2

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest	38	10.2	1.96
Posttest	38	14.89	1.90

TABLE 5
Paired Sample Test for Group 2

	Paired Differences				
	Mean	Std. Deviation	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)
Pretest-posttest	-4.68	1.36	-21.27	37	.000

These tables also indicate that the difference between the pretest and the posttest in the second group is significant at 0.01. Therefore, the difference between the mean score of both the pretest and the posttest is explained.

Third, in order to find out whether the difference between the two Groups as a result of the specific type of feedback (recast in Group 1 and metalinguistic in Group 2) is significant or not, an independent t-test was run. Table 6 summarizes the results:

메모 [M2]: delete

TABLE 6
The Comparative Data on Posttests in Both Groups

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Recast	38	12.45	1.91
Metalinguistic	38	14.89	1.90

The difference between mean scores in both groups is suggestive but it should be proved through the application of the t-test.

TABLE 7
Independent Samples T-Test for Both Groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		<i>t</i> -test for Equality of Means		
	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)
Posttest-posttest	.170	.681	-6.03	74	.000

According to the above table, the difference between the mean at 0.01 levels of significance is meaningful enough to allow us to interpret that the difference between mean scores in Groups 1 and 2 is not due to chance score (See the box plot in Appendix).

DISCUSSION

The result of the data analysis would lead me to decide on the hypotheses formulated in this study. Some points are to be discussed with respects to the results:

1. The findings of the study rejected the first hypothesis as clearly displayed in Tables 2 and 3. It means that recast as an implicit feedback is acting effectively in improving learners' structural knowledge.
2. The second hypothesis was also rejected. Tables 4 and 5 clearly demonstrate the significant efficacy of metalinguistic feedback as an explicit type of presentation.
3. As indicated in tables 6 and 7, the students who received metalinguistic feedback outperformed the students who received recasts. The reason, I think, is two-fold. One is that they probably feel free with metalinguistic feedback when they receive the direct explanation about the inconsistencies. Second is that being provided with the very point itself, students should not take the risk of realizing (or not realizing) the implied feedback. This clearly led to the rejection of the third hypothesis.
4. This study proves that corrective feedback, no matter what type is being put to use, can provide a highlighted input, what Sharwood Smith (1991) called "input enhancement" (cited in White et al., 1991, p. 102). For, it raises a selective attention to the input on the side of the learners and this physical saliency can work to the betterment of language learning.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Amid the controversies regarding the efficacy of various types of corrective feedback, this study casts light on some darker sides of the issue and at the same time adds to the confusion of the issue. The result of this study is in line with the studies conducted by Lightbown and Spada (1990), Tomasello and Herron (1988, 1989), and White (1991) in that all of them are underlining the role of metalinguistic cues as effective in response to the students' erroneous language (cited in El Tatawy, 2002, p. 13). Moreover, regarding the ineffectiveness of the recasts, this study has been confirmed by some studies like Long, Inagaki, and Ortega (1998, cited in El Tatawy, 2002), Lyster (1998a, 1998b), and Lyster and Ranta (1997). They conclude that the techniques which require reformulation, such as clarification requests and comprehension checks, have been more effective than those which do not, namely recasts. On the other hand, according to El Tatawy, the study carried out by Doughty and Varela (1998), unlike the findings of this study, indicates that recasts are beneficial for IL development, but it does not provide evidence that recasts alone have that positive effect. Also, results of Carroll and Swain's (1993) (cited in El Tatawy, 2002) research reiterates that implicit as well as explicit types of feedback were found to be beneficial, and both led to learning. This contradicts the findings of this research which underscored explicit feedback rather than implicit one.

The findings of this study give prominence to the following pedagogical implications for our English language teachers:

1. Turning a blind eye to accuracy in our classroom may end up with severe fossilization of errors which were once simple mistakes. This study clearly reiterates that teachers should benefit from corrective feedbacks since they provide students with more input.
2. As far as the result of this study is concerned, the teachers are suggested that they should use explicit form of comments in response to students' mistakes. This physical saliency facilitates learning and enriches their

reservoir of knowledge on the form of the language.

3. The results also endorse the adoption of instructional strategies by teachers to draw the students' attention to form and/or structure. The teachers are recommended to feel confident with the principles and procedures in form-focused instruction.

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메모 [M3]: feedback

APPENDIX

The Related Figures

FIGURE 1
The Box plot Displaying the Status of the Groups in Pretest

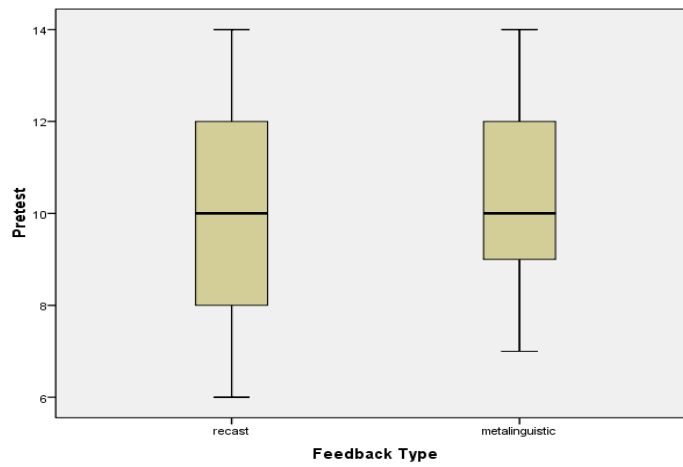


FIGURE 2
The Box plot Displaying the Status of Groups in Posttest

